

Ksenija—A Budding Young Fashion Designer in Estonia

By Anna Markina



Ksenija is twenty-six years old and represents a typical case of a successful young adult Russian living in Estonia. She speaks both Russian and Estonian, though she has studied in Estonian from kindergarten through University. She has a supportive family, an Estonian husband, a good job with sufficient financial sources. She is fond of her work, and is talented and hardworking. She is courageous to respond to challenges that life offers her. She is friendly and open in communication.

Immigration History

Ksenija was born in Tartu, Estonia. In the 1970's, her father came to Estonia after higher education, graduating from military school as a military pilot when he was in his twenties. He was born in the Ural region of Russia. Her mother came to Estonia as a four-year old child. Ksenija mother's family was deported from Ingermanland/Ingria (part of Finland after World War II and now part of Leningrad district) to Siberia, after that they came to Estonia, where they were allowed to reside. Ksenija describes this as following:

"My mother has Fenno-Ugric blood which is why her parents were deported into Siberia after the Finnish War. There they became Russians. And especially when they came to Estonia, here they were accepted as Russians. My grandmother spoke Finnish, but mother doesn't."

Ksenija's mother graduated from University (diploma in economics and psychology). Ksenija also has a sister. They speak Russian at home. Both she and her sister are married to Estonian men.

Education and Career

Ksenija attended Estonian kindergarten and after that she attended school with Estonian language of instruction. She considers Estonian to be her first language. When she went to school, she was the only Russian child. However, several years later more Russian children

started at the school. Ksenija's ethnicity was not a secret. She was told that up until the third grade she had a Russian accent.

"I had Russian accent until third form. I didn't know this and it is funny, because I attended Estonian day-care since the age when I did not speak at all. But other people at school told me that."

She reported some tensions due to her ethnicity at school. She remembers that when her opponents argued with her, they often brought her ethnicity as the major fault. Teachers were very supportive and she never had any problems with them because of her ethnicity.

When she was a school child, Ksenija attended art studio. After graduating from high school she became an art student at the University of Tartu (graduated as a creative artist in the medium of painting). As she always has had a passion for fashion, she also graduated as a fashion designer from the Estonian Art Academy. She participated in several competitions and showed her collections at Tallinn Fashion Week. Now she works as a designer for Ivo Nikkolo fashion brand (probably the most exclusive Estonian brand). In her recent collections Ksenija uses motives from Russian national clothes; she has chosen Russian background music for her defile at the latest Tallinn Fashion Week. Her ethnic roots are mentioned in the introductions to her collections.

Friends and neighbourhood in early childhood and puberty

During her childhood Ksenija's friends were mostly Estonians. She thinks it is because at that age most contacts are made at school. In the lower grades she was not very popular, having Russian descent was a stigma, and some of her friends communicated with her only outside the school.

"It was not prestigious to be my friend at school. I had friends, but we communicated outside the school walls."

When the children became older, there was no problem of that kind any more.

"Most my friends were also Estonians, especially in school."

Ksenija lived during her early childhood and puberty in Tartu (a town with mostly an Estonian population) in a neighbourhood where the Russian population is predominant. After the Russian army left Estonia, the Russian neighbours interchanged with Estonians. Ksenija's sister, who for example attended a school with Russian language of instruction, lost all her schoolmates and many of her friends in a short period. As Ksenija had mostly Estonian friends at that time, she did not experience this loss.

Inclusion/exclusion, experience of discrimination

No doubt Ksenija is well integrated into Estonian society. Despite knowing and accepting her ethnic origin she identifies herself as an Estonian person. She finds her Russian background and knowledge of the language positive and acknowledges that it is beneficial to her career. This is Ksenija's assessment of her situation today. There has been a change in Ksenija's narrative on being accepted into the Estonian community while she speaks about her experiences in primary school. She repeated during the interview that she was the only Russian pupil in her class:

“Anna: You told you were the only Russian in your class. Was it a matter of attention?”

Ksenija: Yes, very much. I asked (to my classmates): how did you understand that I am Russian? I thought my Estonian was perfect. /.../ It was the time of changes and I was sometimes very insulted and somehow without any reason. It continued until ninth form. I had friend with whom I communicated from the first form. But at school it was not very much a prestige to be my friend. We met outside the school. When we were at school we could not talk to each other, but after the classes when nobody saw us, then we could. Since fifth form everybody got older and then the thing became normal. But until twelve form there were some jokes, comments. There was even an incident in 10th form. There was a boy in our class. He was such a sensitive one, an artistic. He often provoked me. And once in the class of literature I told something – I liked always to tell my opinion – that I am grateful /to be a Russian?/ and then he told me “Go then in your Russia”. And the teacher was angry with him. It was a big scandal even on the school level. (.) Earlier we had small problems, but we solved them by ourselves. Because my parents thought that children should have their right to solve their problems by your own. So, I didn't do from such incidents a ‘big number’.”
